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Human Skin Is the Newest Ingredient in the K-Beauty Boom

Sangmi Cha and Hyonhee Shin | July 16, 2026



Illustration by Huanhuan Wang for Bloomberg

Sara Yoon recalls the moment her Seoul dermatologist described the clinic's newest offering. His English wasn't perfect, making the pitch sound even more like science fiction than skin care.

"It's made from dead people," he said.

The 40-year-old influencer and mother of two from New Jersey, who moved to Seoul in 2023, paused — but only for a moment. In the gleaming clinics of the city's affluent Gangnam district, the treatment derived from donated human tissue has become a must-have beauty fix. Patients line up. Vials sell out. Shares of L&C Bio Co., the small Korean biotech company leading the boom with its Re2O skin booster, have more than doubled over the past year.

Yoon's fleeting hesitation reflects just how quickly one of modern medicine's most unlikely ingredients has entered South Korea's beauty mainstream, where the pursuit of *dong-an* — "youthful face" — fuels a constant search for the next breakthrough treatment. But the boom is also drawing regulatory scrutiny. Critics question the ethics of using donated human tissue in cosmetic procedures and whether growing demand could divert supplies from traditional medical uses such as breast reconstruction and burn treatment.

"I tend to be more experimental," says Yoon, who shares her skin-care journey with more than 90,000 followers on Instagram and had her first treatment in September. "I've shifted into more of that cultural mentality of having a lot of trust in the doctor."

Most skin boosters, such as Rejuran, the salmon-DNA injectable, or Laetigen, a pig-collagen treatment, work by delivering compounds that stimulate the skin's own collagen production. But for older patients, or those whose faces have hollowed after rapid weight loss from obesity drugs — a phenomenon widely known as “Ozempic face” — that regenerative capacity is limited.



Yoon receives a low-intensity ultrasound micromassage treatment at a dermatology clinic in Seoul.
Source: Sara Yoon

The Re2O treatment involves injecting a 6-milliliter vial of extracellular matrix, or ECM, derived from processed human skin directly into a patient's face and neck. (“Layer skin over skin,” reads the tagline.) It provides an immediate dermal scaffold that fills fine lines, tightens pores and creates a structure into which the body's own cells can grow. Dermatologists charge 600,000 won to 800,000 won (\$400 to \$530) per session, compared with 200,000 won to 300,000 won for conventional skin boosters.

The skin used in Re2O comes from tissue donated in the US and certified by the Washington-based Association for Advancing Tissue and Biologics, which sets standards for the safe use of donated human tissue and the donor authorization process. A few other Korean companies, including Hans Biomed Corp. and CG Bio Co., also make skin boosters derived from AATB-certified human tissue.

“It's just the skin tissue with all the cells stripped out in order to prevent immune rejection and allergic side effects,” says Kim Han-saem, chief dermatologist at Seoul's DoD Dermatology Clinic, who has administered Re2O since it was introduced in late 2024. “When you inject it into aging or damaged skin, you're not stimulating but rebuilding it, which is why it's a completely different approach.”

Demand for the treatment has outstripped production capacity since last year, leaving some patients waiting as long as a month for an appointment, Kim says.



Different treatments offered by L&C Bio. Source: L&C Bio

The science lends credibility to the pitch. Researchers identify the breakdown of the extracellular matrix — the collagen-rich scaffolding that gives skin its elasticity and structural integrity — as one of the defining hallmarks of biological aging, according to a landmark 2013 paper updated a decade later. As that matrix deteriorates, skin begins to sag and blood vessels become more fragile. Re2O is designed to replace that lost matrix rather than simply stimulate the body to produce more collagen.

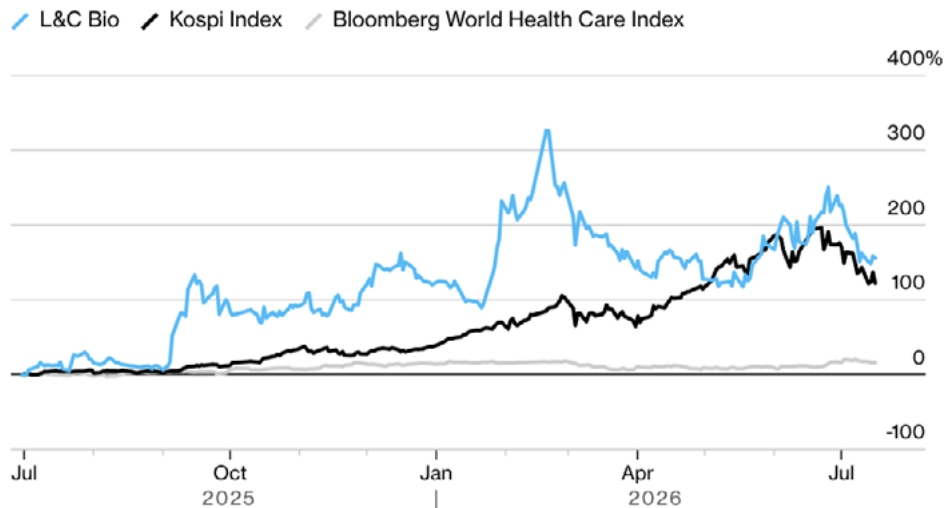
Similar treatments are gaining ground elsewhere. In the US, a product called **Renuva** has gone viral in Hollywood circles, based on the same underlying concept. While Re2O is derived from donated skin, Renuva is made from donated human fat, processed into an injectable matrix that serves as a scaffold for the patient's own fat cells. Over several months, those cells repopulate the treated area, restoring volume without surgery.

Demand for treatments that promise to slow, reverse or conceal the visible effects of aging continues to grow worldwide. The global antiaging market is expected to almost double to \$150 billion by 2035, according to Precedence Research, with Asia leading the expansion as rising incomes, social media influence and rapidly aging populations fuel demand. By 2050, 1 in 5 people worldwide — and 1 in 4 in the Asia-Pacific region — will be over 60, according to the United Nations.

For L&C Bio, the boom is translating into rapid growth. First-quarter operating profit rose 917% from a year earlier, to 6 billion won. The company currently produces as many as 80,000 vials of Re2O a month; it's targeting 150,000 a month by the second half of the year and 300,000 over the next couple of years, according to Chief Executive Officer Lee Whan Chul.

"We're getting inquiries from all over the world, also thanks to the K-beauty boom," Lee says. The company already exports Re2O — which stands for "Return to Your 20s" — to countries including Singapore and Japan. It plans to start shipments to Australia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Russia and Thailand this year and enter the US market next year, he says.

Korean Skin Booster Maker Gains on Flagship Product



The skin-booster boom reflects a broader shift in South Korea's healthcare industry. The number of cosmetic surgeons in private practice has almost doubled over the past decade, to more than 2,700 — the highest concentration per capita in the world, according to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. Doctors trained in essential specialties are increasingly drawn to aesthetic medicine, attracted by higher pay and growing demand.

Medical tourism is amplifying demand. Foreign visitors flocking to Seoul often seek procedures that deliver immediate results, rather than lasers, ultrasounds or other energy-based treatments that require multiple sessions for deeper lifting and tightening.

Critics have raised ethical and safety concerns about the use of donated human skin in cosmetic treatment, warning that growing demand could divert tissue from medical procedures. During parliamentary hearings in October, Korean lawmakers called for safeguards to prevent any such shortages, as well as a stricter regulatory framework, in line with the clinical trials that are required in the US and Europe. South Korea's food and drug regulator is reviewing the issue.

ECM skin boosters are used without sufficient "clinical trials, product approvals or safety tracking systems," Kwon Dongju, a lawyer at Seoul-based law firm Yoon & Yang who specializes in healthcare, said in a submission to parliament in April. He called for a ban on the use of human tissue in cosmetic procedures, the reclassification of injectable tissue products as drugs, and stricter informed-consent requirements for both donors and patients.

The AATB said in a statement that it isn't "aware of instances where the use of tissue for cosmetic purposes has impacted the availability of tissue for other medical treatments." It added that tissue donation honors the "documented wishes" of donors and that, when first-person consent hasn't been obtained, families are informed of the intended categories of use — including transplantation, therapy, research and education — and given a chance to ask questions.



Lasers, ultrasounds and other energy-based treatments often require multiple sessions for deeper lifting and tightening.
Source: Sara Yoon

Lee says that L&C Bio's consent form clearly states donated tissue could be used for cosmetic purposes and that claims about tissue shortages were exaggerated and politically motivated. The company has done more than 400,000 clinical trials, even though it isn't mandated, and would welcome increased regulation and administrative clarity, he says.

"Modern medicine, based on donated tissue, is evolving toward improving skin structure and damage caused by aging, as well as treating burns, trauma and cancer patients," the company said in a September letter to shareholders. "This shows that the noble meaning of donation is expanding into aesthetic and regenerative medical treatments, providing benefits to more patients and members of society."

Public opinion on the issue appears divided in South Korea. Nearly 67% of respondents in a March poll conducted by Research Lab said they'd become donors only if use was restricted to traditional medical procedures. The survey was commissioned by the Health Consumer Network, a nonprofit civic group opposed to the cosmetic use of human tissue. Critical social media posts have labeled the treatment "corpse fluid."

But Kim says patients tend to find the treatment more reassuring than alarming once they learn it's derived from human tissue. "The reaction surprises me every time," says the dermatologist. "Instead of recoiling, most patients say, 'If it's from a human, isn't it safer?'"

Clinicians say the real concern is a wave of legally marketed products made with tissue that isn't sourced from AATB-certified banks. "My concern is the products coming in now from uncertified sources," Kim says. "We won't know where that cadaver tissue is actually coming from — or whether it's been properly screened."

Yoon is already planning her next appointment and says her skin has never looked better. What ultimately convinced her wasn't the science but her doctor's private experiment. He treated one side of his face with Re20 and left the other untouched, then showed her the difference. Within a week, he said, he could see it himself. "I sort of trusted his experiment with that," Yoon says.

— *With assistance from Cat Barton*

https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-07-17/south-korea-s-k-beauty-boom-embraces-human-skin-treatments?in_source=onboarding_confirmation&source=onboarding_confirmation